

Sanctity of Marriage

by

Mrs. E. Oakes Smith, 1850)



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BY MRS. E. OAKES SMITH.

"Shall we say that God hath joined error, fraud, unfitness, wrath, contention, perpetual loneliness, perpetual discord, whatever lust, or wine, or witchery, threat or enticement, avarice or ambition hath joined together; faithful and unfaithful, hate with hate, or hate with love; shall we say this is God's joining?"—MILTON.

I have spoken of marriage as the Great Contract. In a true relation this holy and beautiful mystery of life would be a sacrament, whereas now it stands almost entirely as a civil or commercial co-partnership. In New-England, even, where it might be supposed that marriage would be less adulterated, it has become very much a household arrangement for thrift or economy, where a woman is selected for her domestic points, in the same manner that a housekeeper is secured. Now, a slight salary for one in the latter capacity, would oftentimes be in better taste than the taking of a wife. I even know of one woman, not by any means low in the scale of position, who proposed to do the labor of one of her servants, provided her penurious husband would pay her, a wife, the price of service, six dollars per month, which he was not ashamed to do. Now, will any one say that such a woman was a wife in the true sense—*one* with her lord and master, who paid her as he would pay a menial? Every married man, and every married woman, knows, either from experience or observation, that it is not an unfrequent thing for a man to refuse his wife the supply of money necessary to uphold her position in society, if she *fail to become in all things the subservient creature she is expected to be in the marriage relation.* "Surely we are bought with a price," a woman under such circumstances might quote, in the depths of her humiliation. It requires but little penetration to see that a husband who puts the contract upon so coarse and external a basis, offers himself the strongest temptation for

its violation. She is to him a slave, a menial, an appendage, but not a wife; that is, not one with him in soul and life—his inmost self—the completion of his being—the one divine element linking him to the spiritual; the friend, companion, and comforter, with whom he is to take sweet counsel and walk to the house of God in company; yea, into that divine tabernacle, that mansion into which no corrupt element finds a lodgment.

It may be that I claim too much of sanctity for marriage—that the common voice is against me, and therefore content to view it as a commercial relation, or one of social convenience only, and involving no questions of greater moment than those of legitimatizing offspring, and securing the transmission of property. Even in this point of view, it would be well that the *terms of contract should be such as to secure its inviolability, and therefore I claim that there should be equality of character in the contracting parties—legal equality, at the very least.*

There are social and domestic evils, so secret, so petty and annoying, that they can neither be reached by public opinion nor legal enactment; and a right organization of society would aim at the relief of these, as being harder to be borne than others obvious to inspection and comment. I would have the marriage relation so protected that as few of these evils should arise as possible. I would avoid the need of legislation, by securing the liberty of both parties equally, till each shall be fully competent to judge of the nature of the proposed position. I admit that a gentleman, in the true sense—a man of taste, of sentiment, genius, in other words, one capable of feeling a *great sense of human justice*—will not abuse the confidence of a “Child-wife;” he will treat gently and most sacredly the trust of youth, inexperience, and beauty; but I do not write for these, but for those who discern the Truth “as through a glass darkly,” who are blind leaders of the blind; wilfully ignorant, selfishly corrupt, or groping for Truth, and uncertain how to recognize her aspect.

It is a trite remark, when difficulties arise in the marriage relation, to say, there is “blame upon both sides;” one of those imbecile, inconsequential speeches, by which humanity is apt to relieve itself of its dullness. Two individuals are or are not adapted to each other; they are “yoke-fellows,” or they are the ox and the ass, interdicted by the Jewish lawgiver, and unsuited to the same furrow; they are the diverse

seeds prohibited to be sown in the same field. If there be congeniality of qualities, harmony will be the result; if not, perpetual discontent, inward repinings, or open rebellions, grief, apathy, insanity, and death; or there will arise the long catalogue of petty evils, subterfuges, and evasions, by which a character is lowered in the scale of being, and led on to crime. In the one case, the two walk hand-in-hand, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, to the golden gate, each a help to the other in the divine life; or the one falls from the side of its companion, a disabled angel; or they keep the bad juxtaposition, to grow in aspect and heart like jarring imps from unhallowed regions. This is so much the case, that matrimonial discord has become a theme for jest rather than of sympathy, and one of the surest methods of evolving a laugh either to the wit or dramatist. The whole structure of society is lowered by this tendency, human sentiment distorted by it, and human sympathy carried astray.

We must look to the foundation of social evil very much here—where the issues of life are so much embittered; where children receive discordant elements with their very blood, and imbibe discontent with their milk, and catch

“Their mother's trick of grief,
And sigh among their playthings.”

Now, let marriage be so guarded that a legal disqualification would be a barrier to entering into the relation, and one great step would be reached, and one great source of human suffering dried up. Then the woman who should flaunt her discontent, after assuming a position which must have been not only voluntary, but one of at least some degree of judgment, would be treated with well-deserved contempt. She should speak at the altar the solemn “Yes,” from her heart, and “for ever after hold her peace.” If unhappy, she should suffer in silence, for there is no remedy.

To me there is something appalling, when I see a mere girl promising at the altar to love, honor, and obey, “till death.” Ten to one she does not know or care whether he will deserve to be honored; and, as to obedience, her own stomach, as was said of Queen Bess, may or may not be too proud to bear any will but her own. Then, what does she know of human emotion, of the depths of her own soul or that of another? For any one, even at mature age, to say this, is, in fact, blas-

phemous in the eyes of any one capable of realizing the arbitrary nature of human emotions, and how very uncertain they often become, even under the most careful training and the most exact habitude. This being the case—we are mere creatures in the hands of a being who regards us in mockery, or in the hands of one who knoweth our nature, and has established within us laws, which we as yet but imperfectly understand. It will be folly to say that there is no excuse for change ; that a man or a woman is bad, who does not love as the laws have bound them to love—that he or she whose thoughts or feelings diverge to-day very far from what they were at any other given period must be in the wrong, for the whole history of the race is full of facts to prove that such things are, and that, too, among those very far from being oblique in principle ; romance and poetry are kept alive by facts of this kind, and many of our laws have an existence only through them. Now, to say these things should not be, (I do not mean the outrages that spring out of them,) is to say that the human mind must be limited to a certain standard of development, and not beyond : that the human character must be enlarged only to a certain degree, and all beyond must necessarily be evil—a doctrine calculated to keep the race in perpetual bondage and pupilage, and which has done its full work in dwarfing the species.

When a man or a woman, however, has the courage to promise this, to love till death, they should be of years to realize the solemn import of the words, and willing to hazard the test. One should not be suffered to go forward and put his hand to the seal, clear in vision, cool in judgment, and responsible in law, while the other is blind, undiscerning, and irresponsible. I would say the contract is too momentous in its character to be lightly assumed ; too sacred to be broken, and therefore should be well comprehended.

If my reader has followed me through the preceding chapters, he will perceive that in claiming a woman's right to be individual, and her right to the dignities of property, it was with the view that these might relieve her from the necessity of seeking in marriage that which society ought to award her as her right—that is, position, independent of her relation to one of the other sex ; that she should be truly, nobly woman—marry or not marry, as her heart or her taste may dictate, and yet be honorable ; she should *live* the truth in her own soul, even although that

truth might indispose her to the hackneyed lives of her neighbors, and yet be honorable ; that she should relieve the sick, whether as medical adviser or nurse ; visit the afflicted, whether as a messenger of the Prince of Peace or a Sister of Charity—and yet be honorable ; in all things she should so comport herself that her best and truest womanhood should be developed, and she be honorable, and honored in it ; and finally, that if in the maturity of her beauty and the clearness of her intellect she be disposed to carry all this affluence of nature into this divine relation of marriage, she should be still honorable, not as a reflex of another's glory, but as of herself, lending and receiving.

It appears to me we need less of legislation in regard to our sex, than of enlightened public opinion. Whether we wear this or that costume, or go to the polls or stay away, seems of less importance than a radical understanding of our true selves. Let us assert first the reverence due as a portion of the moral and intellectual type, and gradually we shall take that symmetrical position in human affairs which is for the best good of the world—certainly we shall have other and better influence than we now have.

I am aware that the large class of the other sex, enraptured with the sensualities of Moore, and fit only to admire “bread and butter girls,” will oppose this theory of Marriage. It is the style to prate of “sweet sixteen,” and to talk of the loveliness of girlhood—and most lovely is it, and sacred should it be held ; and therefore the woman should not be defrauded of the period ; she should not be allowed to step from the baby-house to the marriage altar. It should be considered not only unwise to do so, but absolutely indelicate. It should affix odium to parents and guardians, if done by their instrumentality ; or if by the will of the girl, be regarded as an *evidence of precocious development, as unchaste as it is unwise.*

It is a popular error, that our sex are earlier developed than the other, and therefore sooner adapted to marriage. This, however, is physiological ground, upon which I do not wish to digress ; but the assertion that women decay earlier, especially in this country, where early marriages so much prevail, is unfortunately true, and a truth that ought not to apply to us, where the intellect is active, at least, if not profound. And this decay is unquestionably to be imputed to this source. Girls are married and perplexed with the cares of housekeeping, when the pretty

ordering of the "wee things" of the play-house would be in better keeping; they suffer the anxieties and sorrows of maternity at an age pitiful to contemplate, when they should be singing like the lark to Heaven's gate, in the very exuberance of youthful life and the joyousness of innocent emotion. Even admitting that some slight stirrings of the heart should remind her that she was a well-spring of happy affection, it does not follow that she should be put into bondage for the rest of her life to one whom the undeveloped girl may affect, but whom the woman may perhaps despise. A boy has, it may be, a dozen of "undying," "never to be forgotten" experiences of the kind, between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, and yet shakes them off like "dew from the lion's mane," and looks up, after each trial, if there is to be any manhood in him, with a better and stronger humanity; but if a lovely, susceptible girl, always kept in ignorance of her own nature, responds in the slightest degree to the promptings of her heart, she must be married, as if her heart were an effervescent wine, good for nothing if a sparkle escape, and not rather a deep and holy fountain of calm waters and healthful springs, making glad the wilderness of life, refreshing the arid desert of hearts worn and hackneyed by the toil and heat of the day in the wayfaring of the world.

That a woman should be past all joy, and beauty, and hopefulness, at a period when the other sex are in the perfection of their powers, is a most lamentable fact, and one utterly at variance with the designs of nature, who did not create her for the one purpose of the family relation, but to share in that freedom of being and joyfulness of life which is his gift to all, and doubly so to one created with such exquisite perfection and affluence of susceptibility as her own organization involves. It is not unusual for girls to be married and become mothers at sixteen, at the expense of health, happiness, and all the appropriateness and dignity of life; and men seem quite proud of these baby-wives, when in truth they should blush at their selfishness, as they too often will repent over their lack of forecast. It is these early marriages that have produced so many crimes and outrages in society. I remember, a few years since, the public was aghast at the cruel murder of a wife and two children, by the husband and father, in the upper part of New-York. I do not recollect the name, but the state of mind which the confessions of the unhappy man implied, impressed me greatly. He

had been induced, when a boy of twenty or twenty-one, to marry a woman very much his senior, from motives of property; and finding the relation ungenial and repugnant to him, it so wrought upon his mind, year by year, that a species of insanity was undoubtedly the result, and in this state he made the resolve not only to kill her and her children, but also all who were instrumental in bringing about the ill-starred marriage.

The protracted and wearying grief resulting from ungenial relations, is a fruitful source of insanity; and these ungenial relations will be found, in almost all cases, to have been those formed when *one* of the parties was too young to fully comprehend the magnitude of interest involved. I remember, when a child, having a confused idea that to be murdered was one of the possible contingencies of marriage; and this impression was created solely by reading in the public prints the many atrocious catalogues of the kind. I remember, too, the story of a refined New-England woman, married to a man much older than herself, a hard, uncompromising, respectable man; upright in the eyes of the world, and an exact church member, who, while her husband was desecrating prayer, by pouring out those hackneyed platitudes in which so many indulge, arose suddenly from her knees and laid her hand upon his mouth, saying: "You hypocrite, how dare you mock God in this way?"

She was shortly after carried to a hospital, in which she still remains a hopeless lunatic. The friends were suitably shocked, and *pitied him for his misfortune*, but no one saw into the soul of things, where they might have learned of the years of suffering the wife must have endured from his selfishness and intangible falsehood.

Miss Dix must have a mass of material on this ground, and God bless her for her noble mission, one peculiarly adapted to the instinctive and beautiful perceptions of womanhood.* More than one story of suffering of this kind is fresh in my memory. Not far from Portland, Maine, the wife of a wealthy man was for years confined in a small room,

* It may not be known to all our readers, that this lady has been for many years engaged in visiting the hospitals for the Insane throughout the country, and inquiring into the condition of those afflicted in this way, but consigned to private management. In this humane and beautiful mission she has helped to relieve a large amount of suffering.

built up in the garden, and *chained*—condemned to hopeless solitude, and treated like a caged animal, in the very youth of her existence. I was but a child when I heard her story and had that spot pointed out to me. The relator finished the details by a remark often made, "That the insane always turn against their best friends, and that she could not endure to have her husband approach her; a word from him produced the most frightful paroxysm of her disease."

This was most significant, the fact of the story presenting a key to the whole mass of distress and misery. She had endured till her outraged nature could no longer bear, and the entire structure of her mind gave way like "sweet bells jangled out of tune." Illustrations might be accumulated to prove the evils resulting from these early and disproportioned marriages, but these may suffice to prove not only the folly of them, but the fearful amount of crime, suffering, and insanity to which they so often lead; evils wrought into the whole structure of society, and affecting interests that stretch into remote years.



